

# A Search for Meaning in Iconic News Images of the Iraq War

*This analysis discusses the subjective negotiations of meaning in two iconic news images created from traditional and nontraditional sources during the Iraq War.*

*Semiotic analysis is used to tease out the normative role media images play in perpetuating and reinforcing moral, social, and culture values in Western society by discussing, in this study, a now-famous iconic image taken by an American soldier depicting a hooded Iraqi prisoner being tortured at Abu Ghraib as well as an embedded journalist's image of a tired U.S. Marine. Ultimately, it is believed that iconic news images can reveal a dichotomy of conflicting ideals, normative values, ideological beliefs, and moral biases.*

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## Iconic News Images

Since the U.S. invasion of Iraq on March 19, 2003, media images from the conflict have formed indelible impressions on the collective memory. Photographs of rescued U.S. Army Private Jessica Lynch, the toppling of a statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad, the mutilated and burned bodies of U.S. contractors hanging from a bridge in Fallujah, President G. W. Bush dressed in a pilot uniform, censored photographs of flag-draped coffins, and the beheading of civilian hostages dominated the news during the conflict. As one journalist remarked, "Some of the most memorable and iconic news images of conflict and casualty have emerged from wars in the last 100 years, and the Iraq war was easily the most documented conflict in American history" (Davis, 2011). As products of culture, iconic news images determine the extent of an informational and representational system that is firmly established within societal norms, values, and ideologies. Scholarship on the persuasive power of images in the media is extensive and far-reaching. Cultural and visual theorists (Mitchell, 1986, 1994; Perlmutter, 1998, 2004, 2006; Newton, 2001; Burgin, 1982; Bourdieu, 1965; Berger, 1972; Benjamin, 1968; Barthes, 1981, 1964, 1957; Sontag, 1973, 2003; Tagg, 1988; Hall, 1981; Zelizer, 1995) suggest strong ties between visually mediated messages, emotions, cultural memory, and the shaping of social consciousness and public perception.

## Defining Iconic News Photographs

In a visual culture, iconic news images not only trigger emotional reactions but also construct what W. J. T. Mitchell (1994) refers to as a "common stock" of knowledge. The primary thesis of this study argues that iconic news images, such as those from the Iraq War, reveal a subjective negotiation between interpretation and meaning within a particular culture—a middle ground inextricably linked to shaping and reinforcing political consciousness and moral conscience. Iconic news images serve as visual tropes that function to construct and maintain a common symbolic vocabulary of political consciousness (Dunleavy, 1999, p. 27). Moreover, Sontag (2003) suggests that iconic news images can become deeply embedded in cultural and societal belief systems: "Ideologies create substantiating archives of images, representative images, which encapsulate common ideas of significance and trigger predictable thoughts, [and] feelings" (Sontag, 2003, p. 86). Harriman (2007) further observes, "Images, like texts but often even more so, are condensed interactions. If nothing else, they structure a relationship between the subject of the picture and the viewer; often they depict patterns of interaction that can resonate outside the frame."

Interestingly, David Perlmutter's research (1998) describes some of the complex dimensions or characteristics associated with iconic news images such as celebrity, prominence, frequency, profit,

instantaneousness, transposability, frame of subjects, importance of event, metonymy, primordially and/or cultural resonance, and striking composition. As Hariman and Lucaites (2007) suggest, iconic news images represent a “more or less idealized sense of who we are and what we ought to be” (p. 2). For Major and Perlmutter (2005), “Photo icons are crucial units of study because the claims made about their power tend to be global and totalistic, although often these ‘powers’ are shown to be modified or complicated under closer scrutiny” (p. 40). Brothers (1977) contends, “Meaning inheres not in the photograph itself, but in the relationship between the photograph and the matrix of culturally specific beliefs and assumptions to which it refers” (p. 23).

The social and political relevancy of any possible linkage between iconic images and the public perception of news events can also be considered from an ideological perspective. In this study, iconic news images made during Iraq War are conceived of rhetorically as ideological barometers signaling a society’s political and cultural pressure points (Dunleavy 1998). For Sontag (2003), “The familiarity of certain photographs builds our sense of the present and immediate past. Photographs lay down routes of reference, and serve as totems of causes; sentiment is more likely to crystallize around a photograph than around a verbal slogan” (p. 85). Ultimately, as Newton (2001) points out, “A news photograph enters the public consciousness under the guise of the authority of the press: This is true. This is what happened” (p. 12).

### **The Rhetorical Imagination and Iconic News Images**

Iconic news images provide subjective cues toward understanding the fragments of events, our collective past, ideology, and culture. In this analysis, the image of a hooded Iraqi prisoner held at Abu Ghraib prison is juxtaposed against an image of a fatigued U.S. Marine smoking a cigarette during the battle of Fallujah, Iraq. This analysis assumes that these iconic images reveal a dichotomy of conflicting ideals, normative values, ideological beliefs, and moral biases. Feffer (2008) argues,

Iconic images have a concentrated power. The Abu Ghraib “Hooded Man” conveys, in visual shorthand, a range of messages—the sufferings of all Iraqis under U.S. occupation, the double standards of U.S. human rights policy, the failures of democracy promotion.

At the same time, *Los Angeles Times* photographer Luis Sinco’s “Marlboro Man” photograph (see cover image) connotes an antithetical position by symbolically conveying a sense of rugged determination, patriotism, independence, and strength (Dunleavy, 2004; Meyer, 2004; Sinco, 2004). Further, this image could be interpreted as signifying virility and masculinity through the social construction of prescribed norms. In this study, it is argued that the “Marlboro Man” trope solicits symbolic references such as the so-called thousand-yard stare—artwork and photographs depicting the psychological, emotional, and physical condition of combatants.

From a rhetorical perspective, the “Hooded Man” and the “Marlboro Man” disclose contradictions in American foreign policy as well as changes in the routines and expectations of how images are created and disseminated to the public. On one hand, an iconic news image such as the “Hooded Man” demonstrates how nontraditional amateur photography and the Internet increasingly contributes to the production and dissemination of news (Dunleavy, 2004). On the other hand, the photograph of a U.S. Marine in combat reflects the aesthetic and institutionalized expectations and choices of professional journalists as well as their audiences. While the “Hooded Man” image was originally intended as documentation, identification, intimidation, humiliation, or even kept as the personal souvenir by some U.S. military personnel, the “Marlboro Man” is emblematic of traditional war reportage. In the latter, the “Marlboro Man” validates a normalized construction of the public’s perception of war, masculinity, heroism, as well as the demonization of the enemy. In this analysis, as iconic news images, “the Hooded Man” and the “Marlboro Man” engage the rhetorical imagination through the creation of a continuum of binaries opposites such as notions of goodness, beauty, truth, justice, submission and domination, or victory and defeat. Seemingly on polar opposites of the moral and political spectrum, the images appear to “possess emotional power, which can contribute to defining and redefining public sentiment and perceptions” (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007, p. 145).

### **The Normative Function of Iconic News Images**

News production is a normative practice in that social and cultural values are shaped and reinforced through the repetition and recall of salient images and words (Schudson, 2002, 2003). Some critics argue that news values reflect the culture in which they are embedded, coding, filtering, and framing information in very particular ways (Tuchman, 1978). In terms of

images, selecting, sizing, and placing pictures on a page or screen for public consumption indicates the presence of a visual hierarchy. In this instance, news worthiness, aesthetic values, and audience sensibilities determine normative conventions (Hardt, 1999; Perlmutter & Wagner, 2004). The normative function of iconic imagery can also lead to interpretations left unexamined and unchallenged by some audiences. Ultimately, as Moriarty suggests, 'These images reverberate throughout our culture, speak to all, and carry some universal meaning' (2005, p. 254). At the same time, Major and Perlmutter (2005) argue that pictures serve as visual anecdotes, since lens choice, camera angle, and other aesthetic factors cannot account for the totality of all the information in a scene (p. 42). As such, iconic news images operate on the conscious and unconscious levels of society to construct and reinforce common social and cultural values. Moreover, editors follow prescribed norms and standards when deciding on which images best illustrate or edify a news story. The criteria for determining news worthiness, such as consequence, relevance, timeliness, proximity, and prominence, are applied to news images as well as text. Because photographs possess the power of perceptual immediacy not found in text, layers of symbolic and indexical significations may obfuscate a more complex reality. The mediated images viewed on the front pages of the daily newspaper, TV, magazines, and on the World Wide Web are often selected because they help to illustrate or edify stories promulgating specific or "normative" points of view. Therefore, the "mainstream" press reflect the norms and values of the dominant culture through a reliance on pervasive and authoritative sources of information.

During much of the 20th century, individuals not associated with the mainstream media, or those not professionally trained as photographers, produced just a handful of iconic news images. Images such as a firefighter carrying a baby to safety after the bombing of FBI headquarters in Oklahoma City or the "Earth Rise" and "Luna Landing" images made by astronauts during the Apollo missions lie outside the domain of traditional media content production. These images were made by amateurs but were disseminated through the mainstream press. Since 9/11, however, a new class of iconic news images has emerged. In this study, these images are defined as nontraditional because they were produced by amateurs and were later disseminated by mainstream media (Dunleavy, 2004; Meyer, 2004; Simon, 2004; Tomlin, 2004). Ultimately, iconic news images endure over time regardless of whether they were produced by amateurs or professionals.

From a rhetorical perspective, iconic news images made during times of conflict serve as ideological barometers, signaling a society's political and cultural pressure points. Gholson (1998),

The key here seems to be that images become iconic when professionals choose images they feel their audiences want to see. Both the professionals and the audience do not operate in a discourse-free zone; the professionals draw on a storehouse of images and the audience does the same.

In this way images appear to be created within a system dependent on a paradigmatic shift between words and pictures, or in many cases, how they are juxtaposed against one another to solicit distinct meanings.

### Analysis

Many news images from the first year of the conflict in Iraq can be categorized in relationship to a preconceived intention and conventions such as pictures showing high-tech military technology and soldiers preparing for battle (Boehlert, 2003). For Boehlert, "For critics of the coverage, the relentless stream of news pictures, such as those showing soldiers amassing for battle, primed the audience for a war of images, inculcating the general perception of force and invulnerability." Critics suggest that this type of coverage presented a sheltered and sanitized version of the war (Boehlert, 2003; Dunleavy, 2004; Hamill, 2004; Howe, 2004; Robertson, 2004). Howe (2004) observes,

I certainly think we've seen an extremely sanitized version of the war. . . . There are very few images of Iraq casualties, let alone American casualties; and it's a real problem because as a nation we are consistently unprepared for the reality of war.

One year into the conflict, however, iconic news images produced by nontraditional sources came to the forefront of public consciousness, especially photographs from the Abu Ghraib prison of inmates tortured by U.S. and allied forces. According to Boehlert (2003), "The immediacy of these images and their dissemination through the Internet circumvents the formidable 'food chain' of communication channels imposed by government and carried out through traditional mainstream mass media." For Simon (2004), "Some of the most shocking or memorable photos from the Iraq war were almost certainly taken by soldiers or government contractors—and

zipped around the world with an ease that never existed in the days of film.” Tomlin (2004) contends, “The brutal realities of war have been brought home in a new and horrendous way, as digital age ‘travelogue’ pictures and videos are transmitted back home from the war front, sent by e-mail, or posted on websites.” Kellner (2004) argues this point further, noting that, “The widespread use of digital cameras and the ease with which images can be shot and disseminated . . . means that documentation of atrocities in Iraq and highly damaging images were a disaster ready to happen.” In addition, Meyer (2004) contends,

I don’t think it’s too far fetched to assume that the main icons of this second U.S. war in Iraq in 2004, still in process, will be the amateur digital pictures of the tortures performed on Iraqi [sic] detainees at the Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad.

He continues:

In spite of the tens of thousands of pictures produced by professional photographers during this war, these amateur images are the ones that I believe will mark this period in history. These will be emblematic, not only for the abuse performed on the physical integrity of the humans beings depicted in them, but will also stand in for the shame many feel for allowing themselves to be swayed in providing support for this war that indeed was not necessary.

Ultimately, as Simon (2004) suggests,

The explosive photos of abuse in an Iraqi prison drive home a defining fact of 21st century life—that the pervasiveness of digital photography and the speed of the Internet make it easier to see into dark corners previously out of reach for the mass media.

Fhad Al-Harithy (2004) found that new media information channels, i.e., digital photography and the Internet, have made communication faster and less expensive. For Al-Harithy, “Images created outside the mainstream, i.e., the amateur photographs disseminated through cell phones, personal email accounts or on Web Logs, represent a threat to the hierarchical order in which news has traditional been ordered and controlled by mass media.”

### **Abu Ghraib “Hooded Man”**

The viewer sees a barefooted man standing on a box against a yellow-tiled wall (see Figure 1).

The picture quality is poor, color subdued, and resolution low. The man standing; with arms outstretched, is hooded and wears a loose fitting poncho, wires dangle from his hands. On April 27, 2004, CBS news reported that “According to the U.S. Army, one Iraqi prisoner was told to stand on a box with his head covered, wires attached to his hands. He was told that if he fell off the box, he would be electrocuted” (Leung, 2004). From a rhetorical perspective, the hooded man image is an icon in that the picture resembles or looks like what it is—a man standing on a box with what appears to be wires attached to his hands. But the prisoner’s posture and gesturing also appeals to culturally specific biases as well as commonly held ideological beliefs. Once it became evident, through press reports, that the image was “real,” the conditions of knowing surrounding the incident promulgated a response of disbelief and incredulity.

Some of the objects in the frame such as the tiled wall, box, hood, and poncho, appear common for many viewers but without words to anchor the context ambiguities prevail. Further, the hooded man image was just one of many pictures depicting prisoner abuse distributed across the Internet and in the mainstream media. At the same time, the seemingly large number of photographs depicting abuse at Abu Ghraib also impacts meaning in reading the “Hooded Man,” since signification relies on causal relationships between shared signs. From this perspective, culturally specific visual cues such as the elevated position of the prisoner, wires, or the Christ-like posture of the prisoner suggest an indexical relationship. The juxtaposing of signs and symbols in the image become even more complex when universal and culturally specific meanings overlap or converge to create new meanings. Furthermore, unpacking the meaning of the “hood,” for example, may signify anonymity, sequestration, or concealment. Other indexical cues such as the box or the poncho may impose a greater sense of ambiguity for some viewers. Even the outstretched arms offer up nonverbal visual cues by suggesting sublimation, vulnerability, victimization, subjugation, or crucifixion. The viewer may then intuitively arrive at the conveyance of symbolic meanings that have been acquired through social experience and cultural conventions. It is at this point that associations between normative values and visual cues emerge through accompanying texts. Carter (2004) explicates the image further:

Consider the iconic image of Abu Ghraib: a hooded Iraqi man standing on an Army rations box with wires extending from his arms in a grotesque pose almost



**Figure 1** This 2003 file image shows an unidentified detainee standing on a box with a bag on his head and wires attached to him at the Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad, Iraq, in late 2003. DOD photo credit.

reminiscent of a crucifixion. It turns out that this was among the tactics employed by untrained prison guards and interrogators as a means both of instilling fear and of keeping a detainee awake, in faithful execution of the “sleep deprivation” tactic authorized by the secretary of defense. Even though the wires were actually inert, the detainee was likely told that he would be electrocuted if he moved off the box, which he would do if he fell asleep.

The signs and symbols conveyed in the reading of objects or gestures play a critical role in determining the extent of the news image’s iconic persuasive agency. Presented within the larger context of similar abuse photographs, the hooded man becomes emblematic of other images, such as a naked man being dragged around by a soldier holding a leash. The relationship between directly experiencing what is depicted in an iconic news photograph and its cultural value is at the center of the interpretative process. Whitehead (1927) posits: “Direct experience is infallible. What you have experienced, you have experienced. But symbolism is very fallible, in the sense that it may induce actions, feelings, emotions, and beliefs about things which are mere notions . . . ” (p. 6).

The symbolism of the hooded man image emerges from a complex relation to other signs—drawn from memory—that reference societal

norms and cultural values. Perhaps, like a cultural version of the famous Rorschach test for personality disorders, the meanings of iconic news images lie hidden in the layers of signification that surface from the subconscious when triggered. Could the hood over the prisoner’s head signify, symbolically, the autonomy associated with the White supremacy of the Klu Klux Klan? At the same time, the hood could represent a viewer’s identification with moral outrage, condemnation, or a sense of victimization. Therefore, the viewer’s visual encounter with the hidden meanings symbolically links signs of torture to a sense of moral agency. The symbolism of the hooded man suggests a deviation from the prescribed norms of Western society—norms made manifest in secular, legal, and religious codes of conduct. In this reading, the “Hooded Man,” created outside the traditional channels of governmental and media authority, symbolizes all that is faceless, humiliating, and inhumane about the treatment of human beings during times of conflict.

### The “Marlboro Man”

The “Marlboro Man” signifies the antithesis of the “Hooded Man.” In this tightly composed image of a soldier’s battle-weary face, the collective memory of war recalls past images of what has been referred to as the “thousand-yard stare.” The soldier’s face, bloodied and dirtied, is expressionless and resigned to the fate befallen of

those who participate in combat. The image and concept of the “Marlboro Man,” originally produced to advertise cigarettes, has emerged as a symbol of masculinity, roughness, and stoicism. Over time, the term “Marlboro Man” has taken on a meaning embodied in a common stock of popular cultural knowledge. Shortly after the image of the Marine appeared in the mainstream press, the “Marlboro Man” and the “good fight” or the gritty nature of U.S. combatants became synonymous.

For as long as people have been making pictures of war, the human face has been the focus for communicating universal emotions—fear, hope, anxiety, and suffering. The image of the “Marlboro Man” is but the latest incarnation of previous pictures of soldiers at war. While the photograph of the “Hooded Man” seeks to symbolize dehumanization, the “Marlboro Man” aims to personalize and authenticate the experience of the war in Iraq. In a follow-up story about the popularity of the “Marlboro Man” image, *Los Angeles Times* reporter Patrick J. McDonnell (2004) notes,

The image has quickly moved into the realm of the iconic. More than 100 newspapers printed it, although it took the *New York Post* to sum it up in a front-page headline: “Marlboro Men Kick Butt in Fallujah.” The fact that Miller’s name [the soldier’s real name] was not included in the caption material only seemed to enhance its punch.

McDonnell’s explanation provides a glimpse into how news images, although historically contingent, become iconic through repetition and recall. Over time, the frequent appearance of an iconic image creates a collective memory that is often subject to the manipulation of divergent ideological influences. That the “Marlboro Man” image should be selected over hundreds of others available from the wire services that day suggests how, consciously or unconsciously, editors play to the sensibilities and emotions of audiences. Editors, in other words, are looking for pictures they think readers want to look at and expect to see in print. One example of this is use of the term the “thousand-yard stare” to describe the psychological state of combatants. Within visual culture, visual tropes such as the “thousand-yard stare” are susceptible to the ideologically encoded determinates of a society’s moral and political value system. In many ways, the “thousand-yard stare” depicts, intensifies, facilitates, identifies, implements, and reaffirms the masculine mystique of modern combat through repetitive and nonverbal visualization. One presupposition

of the “thousand-yard stare,” as exemplified in the “Marlboro Man” iconic image, calls upon juxtaposition to solicit distinct meanings and sociocultural interpretations. In turn, the image functions as an ideological benchmark that provides a cultural reference for a society’s collective history. The association between the trope of the “thousand-yard stare” and the “Marlboro Man” is not inconsequential, as they serve to rhetorically frame, contextualize, and reinforce public perceptions and opinions. Within American culture, for more than half a century, images depicting the “thousand-yard stare” have come to represent, from a social psychological perspective, a soldier’s “rite of passage.” The image depicting the vacant gaze of a soldier in combat are an attempt by photographers to respond to the misery they see around them. The cultural values inculcated through the replication, recall, dissemination, and acculturation of a socially constructed reality such as masculinity is rooted within a representational system.

The “Marlboro Man,” as is the case with most images, also becomes dependent upon ideologically loaded linguistic practices found within commercial mainstream media practices. In its literal form, the “Marlboro Man,” no matter the distortion, is still mimetic: It is not positioned to counterfeit reality but instead offers us something more universal. Therefore, in the case of the “Marlboro Man,” images may contribute to the desensitization and devaluation of the human condition. When symbolism is clear in an image, its persuasive determinacy increases. In this case, the image of the soldier was familiar to audiences through countless Hollywood caricatures portrayed in war movies. In news photography, the picture is reminiscent of others that came before it, such as David Duncan Douglas’s pictures of grunts during the Korean War or Don McCullin’s now-iconic image of an embattled soldier fighting in Hue, Vietnam, during the Tet Offensive. The “Marlboro Man” picture helps bring closure to the experiences through remediation. Further, the image may be thought of as a visual anecdote—in which the soldier, the “Marlboro Man,” becomes part of a larger narrative of U.S. engagement in Iraq. For Jaffe (2001), “Many people would argue that the ‘Marlboro Man’ represents a return to our original heritage; that he is the last free American.”

## Discussion

Symbols learned through cultural conventions dominate how viewers respond intellectually and emotionally to mediated messages. For Kleinman and Kleinman (1997), “Images of suffering are appropriated to appeal emotionally and morally

both to global audiences and to local populations.” The viewer learns to take for granted the pain of the other, by looking at the universally symbolic spectacle represented across the face and in the eyes of the battleworn combatant. The mimetic nature of photography, as an imitation, interpretation, and representation of reality, moves beyond the boundaries of its denotative state of meaning as it is reconfigured by the visual tropes of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony. Further, pictures do not speak for themselves; meaning is bestowed upon them, and they are wrapped in the metaphor and hyperbole of symbolic action.

The visual cues in the “Marlboro Man” image—the cigarette, shell shock, dirty face, and military helmet—all seem to drive the interpretation in predictable ways. Visual cues help viewers authenticate experience, shape a worldview, and reinforce their own identities and those of others. A sexual stereotype, the “Marlboro Man” glamorizes the ground war fought out by common everyday men. For some, the visual cues may reinforce prescribed gender roles and rationalize sexual differences in society. For others, this image may be read as a “normal” representation of how men should look and act during times of war.

To say that meanings of anything are easily fixed and immutable is misleading. Multiple frames of meaning can be attached to the interpretation of an image, and some pictures may have a more persuasive determinacy than others. The persuasive determinacy of an iconic image may subordinate or minimize alternative readings. For example, if the “Hooded Man” or the “Marlboro Man” are to be considered iconic, they are made so consensually through the interactions between people trying to explain its meaning. In this way, the normative function of the visual—one that perpetuates a predictable reading of cultural objects in a particular way—must be taken more fully into consideration. In this analysis, the iconic news images of the “Hooded Man” and the “Marlboro Man” demonstrate the binary action of opposite norms in society. In this case, the public perceived the harsh treatment of prisoners as deviant in terms of moral, social and ethical norms because it was antithetical to the values of a moral society. Iconic news images possess a power based on a common stock of knowledge. The term “pictures with legs” the salient and long-lasting impact on public perception. The reference to the term is associated with they way wine adheres to a glass as a determinate for quality or value. As previously discussed, the signification of an iconic image extends far beyond the meaning of its original

occurrence and must be considered as a persuasive determinant in the formation of public perception. Ultimately, how we respond to such images should not be limited to gut-level reactions but rather a reaction that encourages a discourse of reason and deeper insight.

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